

Experience is Everything

by Raymond S. Spears



THE son, Jean, was very tired and discouraged; the daughter-in-law, Marie, was tired and thoughtful; the little children, of whom there were four, played many games restlessly and fretfully. In the corner, between the big sheet-iron woodstove and the two walls sat Daddy Jeadreau, tired—not with a day's toil like the young people, but tired because he was old and had done a man's work during a lifetime in the wilderness. The fatigue of sixty years was on his shoulders, and he was patient, observant, silent.

Old Jeadreau's chair was a great rocker which had drifted up on the North Shore, and on the wooden seat was a thick mattress which had moose hide for cover, and was stuffed full of feathers, duck, goose, partridge, and other bird-down till it was as thick and springy as a newly laid balsam bough bed.

In that old chair sat the old man dreaming, and his dreams were memories of toils he had undergone and the jeopardies he had braved; he looked back on his youth and saw its trials in perspective, and so he knew the trials that these young people were undergoing, and he smiled in his heart because they, too, were brave, and they did not know it.

They were fronting just such difficulties as he had faced; they had the impatience of youth, its inexperience, its questionings of the unkind assaults made upon their comfort, and the inexplicable failures of the most ardent efforts.

The old man could remember his own youth, and its precious strength and the joy undying of loving a confident wife, working out destinies together—their own destinies, and setting their young children firmly on the way into prosperity of the soul, if not greatly in material riches. His wife was dead; all the children were grown up, except two or three who were dead; but Jean survived, and old Jeadreau was proud of him, for he was big and strong and impatient, like his father—tearing with ambition, but like his mother, loving little children and loving his father and loving his own wife, whose tongue was sometimes impatient, but what wife ever lived who would not grow impatient with the stolid thick-headedness of men?

"Jean!" she exclaimed. "Don't you see that heater is going out? And why couldn't you put in some dry maple before that cooking fire got so low that the potpie stopped cooking?"

Just so she talked to Jean and to the children, and old Jeadreau leaned back in his comfort, with his eyes quite closed, listening as to an echo of his own youthful days when he did not understand Mammee, the way he would understand her now, if, with his experience, she could be alive with him and he be young again.

Ah—those blessed little children which, if they do not die and become angels, grow up into strong boys and fine young men, so like their fathers, not inheriting much knowledge or instinct about girls and wo-

men, but so willing to learn! And how wise the girls are, even little ones—and Marie? She was so lovely, and old Jeadreau dreamed wistfully, remembering the little girl—his only daughter, who was dead, but who might have grown up like Marie!

"You children, stop that noise! Go outdoors! It's a pretty day! Go out, I tell you!"

The thoughtless little tribe ran out, waiting near the door because the potpie was sweet-savored, and it was almost done, and it was a rabbit one, with two great white rabbits, which Daddy had brought in from the line.

Jean watched his wife anxiously, for he had only the day before returned from his line of traps down toward Oiseau Bay. Luck had not been very good. For two weeks' tramping he had caught one twelve-dollar-fisher, two five-dollar-mink, and some fifty-cent ermines, and something had lugged away four dollars' worth of traps, which he did not dare tell about.

It seemed pitiful, twenty dollars net, for two weeks' work in the best trapping time! Would all the winter be like that? And if next trip was not good; how about the Christmas presents?

Jean had much to think about, and his wife, praying for just one silver fox, not a big one—but a three-hundred-dollar fox, or a five-hundred-dollar, or even a hundred-dollar one! If only God would grant them one week without that steady, that constant pressure upon shoulders and soul and hope itself!

"Maybe we catch a black fox next trip!" Jean exclaimed with that strange fatuity of mankind.

"You think you could catch a thousand-dollar-fox!" She turned on him, her faith weakening, or seeming to weaken, in her man's skill and luck. "You catch a black fox! Indeed not—not you! Not anybody in this house could catch a fox like that! You get fifty-cent weasels, and perhaps not that much, because all yellow-spotted. And you wait till spring to catch mink, because then the skin is shaggy and the hair worn and the fur faded! That's the way you do—and I married you!"

Half in his dreams old Jeadreau heard

Marie's plaint. Half it was in memory, too; for he transported himself back into his own young manhood when his pretty little wife had spurred him, Jeadreau, just so! She had helped him thus. She had driven him thus, sometimes, but not often now that he recalled it. Not nearly as often as he deserved! And, oh, how it had hurt!

"But it was best so!" he mumbled under his breath. "Only poor Jean, he feels now all discouraged the way I did. No! He could not catch a black fox. One must know the black fox's track, and he must follow it and then head it off and put the trap cunningly where the paw will step. One time I caught the trick. *Mon père* could not tell me—no! I had to learn it myself. Then we had black foxes for ten years. Ah, Mamme! Those happy, prosperous years, and she died in our happiness. Tired, the doctor said; because God willed it so, the priest said, lest we be too happy! Well—"

So the old man mused, half listening, and he pitied the children as only an old, old man can pity the young. He thought, too; if only he had just a little more than the hundred dollars, which was saved up to bury him, and to pay the priest, who had comforted, and to pay the doctor who helped him through the agonies. Well, then?

The old man started where he sat. He opened wide his eyes for a minute, and at first his sunken cheeks flushed and then turned pale.

"Yes," he mused, closing his eyes again, "I am very, very old, and I am worn out. What good am I now? If I could only tell Jean—how it would please Marie, who has been so patient with me. Never a word to me! I know that trick of the black fox, which only old men learn, because they know that the black fox is inbred and stupid, but cunning! I know his walk, his track! My eyes are not so very dim!"

Jean had described his trap-line down the east coast; how well old Jeadreau recalled the ridges of stone, the bleak coast of red rock, the slim, green timber, and the old, old runways beaten down by ten thousand years of hoofs and paws, rarely by moccasins.

In two days Jean went on his way again. It was fair weather; he said he would go down the east coast line, from cabin to cabin, clear to Twin Falls River; then he would strike up the river into the mid-wilderness, and home through the back country, over the great loop of one hundred and fifty miles of line—two long weeks of tramping, fixing traps, snow-shoeing, and ever wondering about wolves and trees that fall unexpectedly, and of places where one might trip and break a leg.

The father moved about slowly. He fondled his old rifle occasionally. He played with the children more than ever during the three days that followed. He walked out, two or three times, into the balsam swamp down the railroad, saying that he was trying to kill a rabbit.

Marie scolded him.

"We've lots of rabbits! You've done enough running around. Suppose you should fall?"

"An old man steps slowly and he does not fall!" old Jeadreau smiled over her solicitude. "Don't worry about me!"

He watched the weather with care. He studied the sky morning, noon, and night. It seemed to him as though he had never known so much fair weather in his life, and he complained of it to Marie and to the children, while he showed the two boys how to set a snare that a squirrel would not spring, but a white hare would romp into with blind delight.

"A storm! A soft snow! Suppose we had one?" Marie demanded. "There's Jean—out on the line, and tramping so far!"

"It would be worse if he was old!" Jeadreau apologized. "That's so—I'd forgotten; loose snow would be hard tramping for him!"

Then a nor'wester growled down out of the wilderness. Gray clouds swept by, low-hanging and dull; the snow sprinkled and the dusty crust disappeared under a clean, white mantle.

One minute the old man was in his corner, musing and mumbling as always; the next minute he was gone. Marie, busy with her children, could not tell just what occurred. It was some time before she even

noticed. Then she did not wonder much about it.

At dinner-time she called the children in, and they burst through the doorway, bringing snow on their caps and drifts on their feet, their mittens frozen and their cheeks red as moose-meat.

"Grandpa!" she called into his room. "Grandpa!"

There was no reply.

"He said he got to fix one of those rabbit-snares!" little Jeadreau said.

"What! He's gone out, just before dinner, and he knew dinner was ready to go on the table. Oh—men!"

They finished the dinner; she kept some of it warm in the oven most of the afternoon; she sent the two boys out to look in the swamp to find granddaddy. Night fell and he had not returned.

In alarm she sent the boys up to the store, and three men went out to search for him in the screaming blizzard. In the morning they hunted far and wide, but it was still snowing, and they could find no trail in any direction.

Meanwhile some strange discoveries were made in the little four-room cabin. The old man had taken his rifle with him; he had, of course, worn his snow-shoes, an old and faithful pair of bows which had outlasted moose, caribou, heifer, none knew how many kinds of rawhide webbing—newly strung that fall. His old leather pack, his old rabbit-skin blanket, his little cooking equipment of pail, frying-pan, plate, cup, and such things were all missing.

The storekeeper, when he thought about it, remembered that old Jeadreau had bought tea, bacon, and other supplies.

"What's he up to?" some asked. "He's too old to go traipsing around the winter woods. He can never stand it!"

One day was like another; whoever went into the woods kept his eye open for sign of the man who had wandered away; in the little cabin the children stared at the empty rocking-chair with awe, and when their mother's quick footsteps over the board floor tipped the planks and made the chair swing back and forth, they fled from it in ecstasy of terror.

Their manner was subdued, and the two

boys played at finding granddaddy; the girls cried and hugged the little dolls the old hands had carved out of funny roots and knobs of branches.

Jean returned from his line in nine days. He had hurried over it, his heart beating swiftly with hope. He had started with jubilant certainty that now would fall upon him the good luck for which he had prayed and in which he had believed. From Pic to White Mud; from Gulls to Wolf-Paw; from Oiseau to White Gravel; from White Spruce to English Fishery—across Swallow and up Twin Falls River, he found in his traps the tails of red squirrels, the tiny carcasses of yellow-stained ermine; a slim little marten, a little black mink, a pup red fox; a badly cut-up fisher, evidently one that had been fighting a wolf.

Right through to the last trap he carried his hopes, but when his whole line had been covered he stopped at the edge of the timber and blinked back tears of disappointment; he foresaw his wife's defection; his father must question his skill and energy; the children alone would scream with joy and reckon each tiny pelt a prize from the gods of fortune!

"Ah, the children pay—the children pay!" Jean shook his head. "If I could only clothe them as she would have them!"

All that he had expected was missing from the greeting he received. Not one glance to learn what luck this time! Marie threw herself into his arms and wept upon his shoulders; the children cried aloud.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "What—"

With one accord they pointed at the empty rocking-chair.

"Dead!" he gasped, for the thought that his father might die seldom bothered him.

This man, who had accompanied him through all his life, had cared for him, trained him, nourished him, given him his first bow, his first trap, his first rifle—upon whom he had leaned all his life for advice and for comfort and encouragement, to whom he had looked forward to this very day like a child hoping not to be blamed too much. Dead?

"He went away. He took his rifle—pack—everything—"

"Track him?" Jean demanded.

"No—that northwester. Just that day he went off the minute the storm began!"

"Ah!" Jean gasped. "To let it hide his trail! He thought—"

"Oh, Jean! Did he go because I—because I was hateful! Honest, Jean, I never said a word to him!"

"Never mind, Veerie! Daddy's old—he knows the woods! Oh, if I knew them the way he does! He just—he just wanted to go into the green timber again—I know! I know good old Daddy!"

The splendid confidence of the son soothed all those others who could not possibly know him so well. They sat down to dinner.

Quietly they ate, and not till they were all through did Marie or any of them think of the luck on the line.

"About—perhaps I'll get eighteen dollars—only nine days! It is fair wages—fine!"

"Where do you suppose he went?" Marie whispered. "It's five days now—"

"I'll have to think." Jean shook his head. "It's hard telling!"

He went to the rocking-chair and sat in it, and smoked his pipe so much like his father that Marie smiled through her tears—it was the old man grown young again. It was the son grown up and matured and growing wise, inspired by the atmosphere in which his father had lived.

She smiled wistfully, and in her own soul was a feeling she had never had before. Old Jeadreau had always pretended he didn't like children—and how he had loved and defended Jean! How he had played with her own young ones! How he had tried to please her, and keep out of her way. Now she wondered if he had thought that, perhaps he troubled her, adding to her burden?

All that afternoon Jean sat there thinking. He was a woodsman; he was a reader of animal trails; he knew the lay of the land; he had hunted, trapped, traveled with his father tens of hundreds of miles through the wilderness. Where would the old man go?

Jean slept on the question that night, and before dawn he built the fire in the kitchen

stove; before daybreak he was in his pack, with his light rifle in hand, his ax in its sheath, ready to go forth and strap on his snow-shoes.

"I've an idea," he whispered to Marie, so as not to awaken the children, "I'll be gone about three days, maybe four—"

"Oh, Jean! Come back for Christmas—for Christmas Eve! Be sure!"

"That's five days—sure!"

Jean went out into the little balsam swamp, an island of woods left when a railroad fire burned over the wilderness there. He left the swamp on the southeast side and headed toward the low ridge of stone, rounded by glaciers an age ago, and followed down the east side out of the blow of the west zero wind. He was glad to enter the big woods across the Pic River.

There he turned into the green timber, and tramped uncertainly along, studying the lay of the land and looking at all the trees, watching the snow, looking at the chickadees and blue jays that flocked down around him, for company's sake.

"That old camp must be up this brook somewhere," he mused. "I'll go there. It's likely. Let's see! I haven't been here in ten—twenty years! His old cabin—"

He could just remember—he recognized a bluff of rock; he remembered a bush of maples, ten or twelve acres, where his father had said he made sugar one spring. From there on the way was easy. The camp was a great leaning boulder, and his father had built it up in the old days with logs for sides and a big fireplace in front, all housed in. He went up to the place biting his lips.

Sure enough!

"I know old Daddy!" he whispered. "Oh, I know him!"

The sides of the old camp had long since rotted down, but the stone fireplace remained. On either side were stacked up green limbs of spruce and balsam, freshly cut. All around it were tracks nearly buried in the snow. There was even some dry kindlings, some extra wood back under the rock to insure starter for a fire for the next comer.

Jean did not touch that dry wood. Instead, he cut some for himself, and brewed

a can of tea and ate a broil of rabbit leg and bread for lunch. He circled around the camp, and found a snowed-in trail leading toward the southeast.

It was a snow-shoe track, and Jean would have enjoyed following it through the deep snow, if he had not worried about what he might find at the end of that faint trace.

Always Jean had to worry! Always he had to feel the dread of what might happen! That is the way of young men. He swung with long strides along the trail. Half a mile from the camp he stopped short with a loud exclamation.

There was a trap-cubby, built up prettily with sides of old wood and top of balsam boughs, and with its back against a gaunt hardwood stub. Out to one side reached up the well-sweep pole, resting in the forks of a sapling. The trap had been sprung, and dangling in mid air was a splendid big fisher, frozen and stark.

"The old Indian!" Jean laughed, taking the fisher and resetting the trap. "He couldn't keep out of the woods!"

Half a mile farther, in a gap in the stone ridge, there was another trap, and a beautiful marten was in it. Through that gap was a runway of the wilderness creatures. A trap there couldn't help but catch something.

Jean laughed, but flushed uneasily, too, for he had run his own line all around this region, having chosen his own trapping country. His father had never commented on that fact—had he?

Then Jean did recall that his father had said he preferred a shorter line and wild-rose petal line-loops around the camps instead of a far swing or circle clear around the country.

"You get to know all the animals in a small territory," old Jeadreau had said.

Jean remembered this now as he saw the blaze-marks made by his father thirty, forty, perhaps fifty years ago. No, it could not be fifty years, because he had not learned about short lines till he had been trapping quite a while, and had to meet weariness with craft.

Jean hurried on. There were traps that did not contain victims. There were traps, however, that yielded more fur. There was

a second camp on the line—a spruce-bough camp in the depths of a wilderness. What effort it must have required for those ancient limbs to toil through that snow!

The trail was now plain, for it had been made since the storm. It led over the trap-line of the aged man's younger days, but not exactly. Sometimes it took a new course through the woods, and on such by-ways Jean found traps in places that looked strange to him.

Instead of cubbies, the traps were under rock overhangs, or under trees that had fallen, or in a hollow stump. The tracks the setter had made in the snow were covered over, and no sign of a human appeared within yards of the bait-lures.

Jean would have missed many of these traps had not each one been marked by a fresh staggered blaze on a tree within two or three rods. His eyes thus sharpened, he found the traps and sometimes fur in them.

Thus the trap line led into the wilderness depths, and sometimes there was a trap every half-mile, but in other parts of the line there were two-mile gaps without a trap anywhere. Every few miles was a little brush shack. The trail led into a perfect tumult and jumble of rocky hills and interspersed streams with pools and lakes surrounded by dense swamps.

Jean had never seen this country. Wherever he turned he noted tracks of fur in the snow, lynx along the stone cliffs, marten among the knoll top-tree clumps, mink and otter along the streams, and fisher in whatever direction he turned. More than all the other tracks were foxes. He saw them! He shot a big red one with his bait rifle; and every trap he found contained a fur, for every trap had been put with a great temptation at the crossroads of the wilderness.

In this land the old man's track disappeared. It circled around and down into the deep woods and up over the bare ridges of stone, where the wind had swept the rocks bare, leaving only scales of ice and clods of frozen moss. In vain Jean tried to find the snow-shoe trail! He circled around and around, finding new tracks, but invariably they led into tracks he had already discovered.

He did find, however, the cave in which the old man had spent two or three nights. That accounted for the circling tracks, for the lost trails. Jean camped there one night. In the morning a gale was roaring among the stones and trees, bringing down drifts of snow.

The son set forth in the storm, circling up and down, but he could find no further signs of his father. He returned to the cave, and, after cooking a rabbit, started westward, which would take him out of the broken land. He crossed old tracks which he thought were his father's, but he could not be sure. He went on until he struck one of his own trap-line cabins.

It was a little log hut in the bottom of a ravine. It contained a thick rabbit-skin blanket, cooking outfit, some extra traps, a supply of food. As he entered it he looked around curiously.

Everything seemed to be exactly as he left it—blanket, tea can, frying-pan, pail. Yet something seemed displaced—he puzzled over the question, but could make nothing of it. It was as though there was some one just around the corner, just under the bunk. As the wood in the corner had not been touched, he knew it was all imagination.

In the morning, when he followed the trap line homeward, worrying about his father, thinking what perils the old man must be undergoing, he found the loose snow a puzzle to him. He stepped in his old tracks, but, somehow, he could not quite catch his own stride. He had never noticed that feeling before, except when following some other man on snow-shoes.

He forgot his wonder when, on rounding the point of a hill, he saw dangling in one of his own traps a magnificent black fox—a great, glossy fellow, dead where he swung on a long well-sweep.

"A black fox—a black fox!" he gasped:—"A thousand, two thousand dollars!"

The animal was frozen stiff, and he took it out and reset the trap in the cubby. He marveled to think that any black-fox should venture into a cubby, but counted it against the animal's hunger and against the fact that the brute probably had never seen or smelled a man.

He hurried on with the pelt. He romped through the woods. He gave way only now and then to the depression he felt because of the mystery of his father. What short steps the old man had taken; what short distances apart had been the night-camps!

Jean ran out into the open across Pic River. He hurried homeward. He saw the blue smoke of his cabin from afar. He saw his children at play in the snow on the side-hill. His first steps were quick, but later his snow-shoes dragged. How could he report his failure to find granddaddy?

With the frozen black fox on his shoulder, stark and carefully wrapped to prevent rubbing the exquisite fur, he tramped across the open toward the house. He dreaded the moment of his arrival. He was afraid of what it would bring him!

"He's such a good old Daddy! I wish—"

"Hi-i-ii! Whe-e-e-e!" Cries and screams were borne to his ears by the frosting winds. At last the children had seen him! The boy Jeadreau raced ahead of the others, running lightly on barrel-stave skis.

"Hi-i!" young Jeadreau called to the others. "Daddy's got some fur! Daddy caught a black fox. Granddaddy bet he would!"

Jean let the children carry the fine carcass in. They handled it with every care. Marie met Jean at the doorway, and, after one look at the burden of the children, she began to cry—tears of happiness!

"I didn't find Daddy!" Jean faltered.

"Why, he's come back. He's here!"

"You bet, sonny, he's here!" the high voice of the old figure starting stiffly up from the big-rocking-chair cackled. "What luck? Did you run the traps I set on my old line?"

"Yes, there's three fisher, seven marten, nine mink, and two lynx in your fur, Daddy!"

"'Rah fer Christmas, eh, boy!" the old man laughed, with a glance at the black fox, adding, "Did you set the traps again?"

"Sure I did!"

"And coming in—what luck—your line, I mean?"

"A black fox, Daddy!"

"I knowed it! I said he would, didn't I, kidlets? I said he would, didn't I?" The

old prophet grinned, turning his eyes the other way.

"He did—he did!" the children shouted.

"You don't mind—you wouldn't mind, if yer old Daddy skins 'im? I kinda want to skin a black rascal agin. My hand 'll be stiddy—mayn't I?"

"Why, of course, if you want to bother!"

"Bother—bother—to skin a three-thousand-dollar black fox! Aye! A big bother that 'll be!"

Then the old man carefully thawed the carcass, and he sharpened his little old skinning blade, working in the warm corner of the room by the heater-stove. He slit the hind legs skin, worked it off, paws and all, right up to the back of the neck. There he stopped when a slightest tinge of dark discoloration showed. He carried the carcass out into the woodshed and quickly cut out the neck, ears, eyes, and jaws.

As he worked he grinned. With great care he cleaned the blister out of the back of the fox's neck, where a club had landed and killed the brute. Jean had found it stark and dead! The old Daddy was happy in the happiness of the children—children and grandchildren. It was their fox, their success—a greater success than any old Jeadreau remembered having enjoyed himself!

"Kinda funny 'bout dat!" old Jeadreau, sly woodsman, chuckled to himself. "Dat fox-break has neck hung up by de fore-paw! Well, lots an' lots of t'ings fer young fellers to learn back der in dem beeg woods. But dey learn, all right. Marie got a mighty good man. He got a fine woman, good-hearted girl, all right. I can be proud, too. He track his old Daddy all the way round, not know if I was too ole to wallow in de loose snow. By golly, pretty stiff in my ole j'ints! But I take de short line an' trap heem strong! Bettair dan a long line on'y half trapped. Dem young fellers don' know dat—they have yet to learn, but, by an' by, like me, day'll know with much satisfaction."

When he carried the fur in, with a fox-stretcher board, his children and grandchildren were planning Christmas. Ah, what a Christmas their black fox would give them, and something for old Jeadreau, too!